Philosophy, Methodology, and Research Ethics

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As on foundations became a tradition in the early 1980s, due primarily to the efforts of J. Randall Koetting, Barbara Martin, and Alan Chute. The purpose is to bring foundational issues to the attention of members attending the national/international conference. Aside from efforts to raise awareness, opportunities for discussion, questions, and exchange are encouraged.

The presenters at this particular session were Alan Januszewski, Past President of the Research and Theory Division Randy Nichols, Chair of the AECT Professional Ethics Committee; and Andrew Yeaman, past Chair of the AECT Professional Ethics Committee, and formerly a member of the Research and Theory Division’s Board of Directors. The session was a follow-up to the professional development workshop on “Research Ethics” at the AECT 2000 convention held in Long Beach. It explored some of the relevant literature of philosophy in an attempt to shed light on potential ethical violations relevant to scholarship in education and the social sciences, particularly educational technology, and suggested ways in which these violations might be avoided. This session went beyond the issues of forging data, dealing with human subjects, reworking research questions, and so forth, and went into fundamental considerations such as how philosophy of social science and philosophy of history can affect the methodologies used to conduct research and scholarship in the field of instructional design and technology.

SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESEARCH ETHICS

When you look on the packet containing a new computer cable, you will read a phrase such as: “These cables are rigorously tested and certified by quality assurance engineers and are 100% fully compliant with current specifications and all other applicable industry standards.” The same thing cannot be said for instructional technologies. The difference has been known for some time (Januszewski, in press). As you can see in this cartoon from the days of programmed instruction and teaching machines, the imperatives to produce and sell outweigh any practical questions regarding how the box is used or whether it really works.

Today, those issues not only concern our John Deweys but also appear on the cover of U.S. News & World Report (Kelly, 2000). Huge expenditures for “technology” indicate another golden era for our profession. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask if “technology” is only fool’s gold (Cordes & Miller, 2000). The fact is, the general public has become aware of what we, as experts, have known for a very long time: setting students or trainees in front of glowing, intriguing boxes does not ensure learning or any other sort of good result.

How this dilemma affects research leads directly into research ethics, especially since the presidential apology for the infamous syphilis experiment (Fairchild & Bayer, 1999; Gray, 1998; Jones, 1993). That shameful “scientific research” benefited no one apart from the many investigators; it was racist and classist; sick people were not made well even though effective treatments were possible—especially when antibiotics became available; more people were infected; public money was wasted; and, worst of all, the program acquired a life of its own, continuing decade after decade as a cruel institution without purpose. Plagiarism, fail-
ure to cite sources, and data fabrication remain unethical but look like academic crimes in comparison.

A recent ethical development is the reconsideration—if not the end—of control-group research. AIDS researchers, in an ironic parallel to the syphilis study, encountered resistant participants and activists who gained expertise (Collins and Pinch, 1998). An ethical insight that emerged was that if a drug deserved attention it should be worth testing without placebos.

A definitive chapter on ethics for research in education is provided by Howe and Moses (1999). The “traditional” approach is based on the laboratory heritage of medical science. This heritage is the source of research ethics with human subjects—and what was missing from the syphilis study: informed consent, protection of participants, no harm, and no deception.

The “contemporary” approach is based on interpretive and qualitative research. The descriptions are abbreviated, stereotypical, and no more informative than tourist postcards sent home after visiting three “theories” and two “isms”: communitarianism, care theory, postmodernism, critical theory, and contemporary liberal theory. As a consequence, it does not feel surprising to read that institutional review boards tend to prefer the traditional to the contemporary.

The chapter moves to a close by playing down the power of professional ethics. It neglects that a code of ethics will maintain a profession’s status by closing the frame to exclude the villains who engage in misconduct, whether they are deviants from inside or impostors from outside. It places feminist research outside the tradition of empirical rigor. It appears to be a slur based on feminists’ overt politics. Although traditional research is aligned with utilitarianism, the contemporary analysis is warped by mistaking philosophical labels for social performance. Eisenhart (1999) references Howe and Moses (1999) and finds good in them, telling readers that moral-political ends are important, are negotiable, and that education research is advocacy research.

What should an ethical researcher be doing about technology? The answer is not in supporting technomania but in preparing professionals (Yerman, 2000). Consider the problem of Detroit’s closed library media centers (Glick, 2000). As in other school districts, the cause is a shortage of certified school librarians. A grant was obtained which will pay for 20 teachers to obtain masters degrees from the Library and Information Science program at Wayne State University. In the summers they will analyze 10 closed libraries and write proposals for funds to reopen. The point here is that instead of demonstrating new gadgets, researchers should implement what is known to be good for people—such as school library media centers increasing reading—and work on understanding the social technology.

**RESEARCH, ETHICS, AND CRITICAL THEORY**

How should an ethical researcher be studying the social questions regarding technology? One approach that is available is the critical approach. Critical theory is a broad tradition based on the use of critique as a method of investigation. The primary characteristic of this school of thought is that social theory—whether reflected to educational research, art, philosophy, literature, or business—should play a significant role in changing the world, not just recording information.